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AUTHOR Wirt, Frederick M.
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ABSTRACT

Implications of conflict management for the superintendent's role as instructional leader are explored in this study. A theory of conflict management that looks at the shift in the administrator role from nonpartisan to political professional is applied to case studies of three Illinois school districts in which superintendents involved in teacher contract conflicts chose to fight, avoid, or mediate the conflict. The degree of community conflict was found to have a significant effect on superintendent behavior. A high degree of conflict was conducive to an assertive, compromising, or presiding superintendent role, and a low degree contributed to a professional, delegator, and facilitator role. A conclusion is that the superintendent seeks system maintenance and personal survival amid conflict, and that opposition between excessive attention to trivial matters and serious conflict management contributes to superintendents' lack of time and inclination to provide instructional leadership. (32 references) (LMI)

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The Missing Link in Instructional Leadership: The Superintendent, Conflict, and Maintenance

Frederick M. Wirt
Professor, Political Science
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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The National Center for School Leadership

Project Report

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Center staff

Russell Ames, Director
Martin Maehr, Co-Director
Stephanie Parker, Assistant Director

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The National Center for School Leadership
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology
405 N. Mathews
Urbana, IL 61801
(217)244-1122 Fax number (217)244-4948

Abstract

This study explores the implications of conflict management for the superintendent's role as instructional leader. A research review, joined with a theory of conflict management, sets the background for this paper. This is projected into case studies in which superintendents in teacher contract conflicts chose to fight, avoid, or mediate the conflict. The degree of community conflict also affected superintendent behavior. When it was high, the superintendent could act in an assertive, presiding, or compromising role. When it was low, one could act as a professional, delegator, or facilitator. Amid conflict, the superintendent seeks system maintenance as well as personal survival. Caught between excessive attention to trivial matters and serious conflict management, the superintendent lacks the time, if not the inclination, to provide much needed instructional leadership.

The Missing Link in Instructional Leadership: The Superintendent, Conflict, and Maintenance

Defined professionally and publicly as leaders of education, superintendents give very little evidence that they actually lead or that their leadership affects student achievement. What we find, instead, is that superintendents undertake much more often another role, namely, system maintenance accomplished by micro-management of district operations. Also, they are engaged to a lesser degree in a third role--managing conflict within their school districts. These roles of educator, manager, and politician combine in the individual superintendent in differing combinations. But as a profession, we find that their educator role is not much in evidence, that their conflict role is new and stressful, and that their management role consumes their energies.

This paper bypasses superintendents' familiar management role in order to explain the little analyzed roles of conflict management and instructional leadership. We will view these roles from the

perspective of the differentiating influences working upon them from the varied community context of this administrator. The differences that these contextual differences make for the superintendent's roles will help focus our analysis. There clearly is no singular conception of leadership-certainly not of superintendents' leadership--that can be found in experience; rather the concept that their leadership is indeed situational is widely understood by practitioner and scholar alike.

We will first review the research on the condition of the American superintendent today, noting the multi-faceted nature of the position. Next we will examine a little studied aspect of the position--conflict management amid an increasingly turbulent environment. We will illustrate this aspect from a theoretical perspective that we then apply specifically to conflict over contract negotiation. From this exploration, we will derive an understanding of why the literature reports so little instructional leadership by superintendents.

Review of Research on the Role of the Superintendent

The Contemporary Condition of the Superintendent

One major reason that superintendents exercise little instructional leadership is that they are busy otherwise, operating for a quarter century amid a rolling crisis over school issues, a crisis with which they can just barely cope--if that. The Chinese ideograph for "crisis" contains two symbols--"danger" and "opportunity"--but most American superintendents experience only the first. Let us begin, then, by understanding this context as it has evolved, the costs of the conflict surrounding this crisis, and the consequences for this administrative role. Amid this environment of conflict, cost, and consequence, the superintendent will be found to have shifted from being educational leader to a fort-holder and scapegoat.

The Shift to a Turbulent Environment

We need not linger long on the factors that have transformed the superintendent's role over the last quarter century from an almost unchallenged leader and manager, because it is by now a familiar account. For decades, a myth of their apolitical nature had enabled

school administrators to do what other kinds of professionals have also done, namely, define their job for themselves. After all, "A profession is not, then, an occupation, but a means of controlling an occupation" (Johnson, 1972). In effect, professionals of all kinds have been given the right to define the reality of their services (Fredson, 1970, chap. 4), including making four major decisions: defining its quality, determining its quantity, training its practitioners, and evaluating its effectiveness (Wirt, 1981).

But throughout this earlier era of professional control, there was still a potential for conflict because power was divided over school decision making at the local level. As the Blumbergs (1985, chap. 2) have pointed out, during this period there was always some degree of pressure on superintendents from their boards. The very origin of the position early in this century had caused a sharp wrenching of power into their hands from the boards. Throughout this period of professional dominance, superintendents still reported facing a continuing challenge. As one of the new type superintendents reported long ago, "It is to be lamented

that on the part of many, very many districts there is so great a Want of Harmonious Action. The first sound that strikes my ear, on entering a district, is often that of contention, feud, and dissention" (p. 17).

There occurred in this position, then, what happens elsewhere in democracies; that is, the granting of power attracts conflict because its use can affect the interests of others. As a result, the Blumbergs conclude, the very essence of the superintendency has been and still is "living with conflict," as they subtitle their study. Nevertheless, superintendent control could be great as long as challenges to it were kept disaggregated. But over time that changed, as seen in the past quarter-century's rising tide of criticism of superintendents' power.

Wirt and Kirst (1989, chap. 1) have traced these currents of criticism building up against school professionals. Individual-level dissatisfaction by parents over different matters finally mobilized into group-level protest and ultimately led to professionals adapting to these pressures. This development was but one part of the larger "revolt of the client" against

all kinds of professionals occurring in America and elsewhere (Haug & Sussman, 1969). For example, administrators and their boards faced challenges from:

- minorities, over equal educational opportunity;
- parents, over accountability;
- taxpayers, over financial costs and equity;
- teachers, over collective bargaining;
- students, over civil rights;
- and, eventually, state and federal governments, over mandates.

By the 1970s, one or more of these challenges were facing all superintendents.

One sign of the new turbulence is the increasing number of groups that superintendents now see facing them (Wirt & Christovich, 1989). Regardless of size of community, location within or outside the metropolis, and length of tenure, 42 percent of a national sample reported in 1981 that they had perceived increasing demands arising from as many as five groups. Of these groups, teacher groups were reported by 62 percent as generating greater demands. Also, 61 percent reported more pressure from citizen opinion in general, and 54

percent saw more pressure from state and federal governments. The pervasiveness of this demand pattern, regardless of locale, indicates that it is not simply the big city that pressures the superintendent.

Squeezed at the top by mandates and national reform groups, and at the bottom by constituent groups in the district, some school systems faced organizational shock and decisional overload. As a consequence, the superintendents could no longer control their agenda or shape decisions as they had in the past. Observers concluded that "The superintendent must now deal with shifting and ephemeral coalitions that might yield him some temporary marginal advantages. The earlier 1920-1960 era of 'the administrative chief' has passed with profound consequences; the new school politics is much more complex and less malleable" (Wirt & Kirst, 1989, p. 27).

A Contemporary Snapshot of Superintendents

We can focus all these events and their consequences by noting work conditions that Illinois superintendents recently reported to their state association (Glass, 1988). These findings are the more

noteworthy because the large sample reflected very heavily the very numerous middle and small-sized districts. In such sites, where less heterogeneity of population would suggest less conflict (e.g., Peshkin, 1978, but see Wirt & Christovich, 1989), widespread problems were reported. These included:

1. The biggest problem--finances--was the single factor that most inhibited the superintendents' effectiveness. Most districts were in poor financial condition, and only about 25 percent were in good or excellent condition. An air of deepening crisis pervaded their answers.

2. State reform efforts of the 1980s had inundated them, but most (40%) said they had had no effect on student scores, and another group (21%) said the effects were actually negative.

3. Most reported stress, moderate (51%) to considerable (32%).

4. One-third were eligible for early retirement; almost half of these were willing to take early retirement and another 29% didn't yet know if they would.

5. Their school boards liked them, despite all this pressure and stress, for two-thirds reported high ratings. However, the boards were continually encroaching on administrative authority by trying to manage school matters (39%). One-third even had a board member serving as chief negotiator for teacher contracts.

6. Important for our later discussion, none of this school board conflict arose over curriculum and instruction problems. Very little of the superintendent's time was reported to be in instructional matters, for example, assessing outcomes (14%) or staff and administrator evaluation (.02%).

Specific sources of stress come out in a recent study of New York superintendents (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985, chap. 8). Quite commonly they listed stress first from teacher contract negotiations (a matter we examine later), then from budget preparation and presentation, removing poor teachers, expelling students, and stroking the news media. We believe that another source of stress lies in the ever increasing burden of reporting and meeting standards imposed by state laws and

regulations. Clearly, this contemporary snapshot demonstrates that the superintendent no longer operates independently of the pressure of school constituencies at the local and state level.

Implicit in these reports is a changed configuration of power in educational decision-making to one of power-sharing. New participants in this process now make demands and negotiate; external mandates--often unfunded--now compel new behavior by administrators and teachers; and consequently oversight--much less leadership--by the local superintendent now seems unlikely. Indeed, new kinds of activities were now required of the superintendent. Thus, by 1980, hundreds of administrators in state school cultures as different as Oregon and Tennessee reported similarly that their greatest pressure came from adapting to state and federal rules, the second was from getting public backing for programs, and the third was from collective bargaining (Brimm, 1983). These results typify the new streams of challenge and conflict sketched above.

Moreover, the result is a fragmented centralization of schooling authority that, in effect, bypasses the

superintendent. Indeed, for these professionals, the decision often rests upon avoiding conflict. That is far removed from the earlier superintendent who created quality programs and then oversaw the implementation of school quality. Of course, without the external stimulus of mandates described above, the handicapped student's education would have been less worthwhile. In an earlier time, the costs of inaction were borne by the student; more recently, the cost is paid by other authorities--including the superintendent who ends up with little to say about instruction.

The Costs of the New Context

Permeating this newly politicized context is a new set of costs that these administrators must now pay for their professional efforts. Those costs are evident in their own careers--and sometimes in their own selves.

The American Association of School Administrators' own self-reporting makes manifest the turbulence and tension. By 1980 Cunningham and Hentges (1982) reported from their data: slightly higher turnover rates since 1970, less time in the career as superintendent (just seven years on the average), greater tension with the

school board (indeed, one in six left his/her last job for this reason), and fewer superintendents who would still enter this profession if they had it to do over again.

These pressures suggest the new costs for being a superintendent. We noted before the willingness to retire early among many Illinois superintendents. Another cost is the impact upon the length of tenure. Cuban (1976) found that in the big cities, the turnover rate had doubled between the 1950s and the early 1980s. In the latter period, three superintendents within five years held office in New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Boston, Seattle, and Denver; their average length of tenure fell slightly with each decade. Here and elsewhere when tenure is reduced, the result is a briefer period for superintendents to direct educational services in their school districts compared to an earlier era. The modern figure stays around a shorter time in the big cities where the need for instructional leadership is the greatest.

The emotional context of their work is little studied, but the Blumbergs (1985, chap. 9) show how New

York superintendents share a common emotional cost arising from their "living with conflict." They report "frustration, caused by the slowness of the decision-making process; boredom; loneliness; feelings of inadequacy; concern over the compromise of ethics; and feelings of personal stress" (p. 138). Some of their observations (pp. 151-154) provide the emotional context for their professional tasks:

> "There are times when I feel like I have about 15 balls in the air at one time, like a juggler."
>
> "The thing is, we're continually dealing with people on very gutty and grinding problems, and therefore we get emotionally tied up. I begin to lose sleep."
>
> "What bothers me most is that everybody gets upset about nitpicking bullshit, but nobody wants to get upset about something really serious."
>
> "About board meetings which sometimes last till 1 or 1:30 in the morning. They're tense. You can never tell where the shots are coming

> from. It's hard to tell what's going on out there. Most of the community comments are critical. They are rarely complimentary. And they get very personal."

In effect, the superintendency is regarded by citizens as "public property" (chap. 10). Superintendents' out-of-school time and energy are publicly regarded as belonging to whoever can get to them with a complaint; they are regarded as "accessible, regardless of time, place, or occasion" (p. 156). As a result, private and family lives are overwhelmed so that family and wife ties are sharply impacted; speaking for all, one New Yorker says simply, "I'm seldom home at night" (p. 163). Their wives reported (chap. 11) the stress of having to share also in being "public property," but wives also know the worthwhile nature of their husbands' work; "understanding and tolerance of the situation" were also norms of these beleaguered wives.

Finally, note that there is another cost that is little reported--the impact on health. The new pressure can get so bad that--in one tragic case in

Cleveland--suicide resulted. But other physical costs, while less, are still painful. Thus, in 1981, over half of 270 western administrators (cited in Brimm, 1983) reported illnesses linked to psychological or physiological stress, namely, cardiovascular problems and ulcers. These costs may underlie the new reports of more superintendents seeking early retirement or changing careers. On the other hand, not all superintendents are walking wounded. The same report notes their confidence, sense of competence, and belief in the growing importance of this career. Indeed, as Crowson (1987, p. 51) observed recently, the conflict that these administrators face may be less than that for city managers, who spend more time in conflict resolution (Zeigler, Kehoe, & Reisman, 1985, p. 156). However, a more recent comparison of the two types of administrators finds some evidence that city managers see less group demands and have greater acceptance of their policy recommendations by board and citizen than do superintendents (Wirt & Christovich, 1989, pp. 10-11). But there is no disagreement that the decisional context the educational administrator now

faces is much different than that of a quarter century ago.

Role Response to Conflict

The force of these new political currents upon superintendents had to affect the nature of their job, so that their role underwent change. Some aspects of this role and its change will engage us in this section. We define role as expectations of behavior and norms imposed upon individuals who play a part in private, public, or professional life.[1]

Stages of Client-Professional Conflict

Accompanying this role change was a standard sequence of conflict between clients and administrators that is typical when public services undergo challenge. This conflict is inherent in modern democracies when professional power is challenged by the participatory impulse of democracy (e.g., in education, see Lutz & Iannaccone, 1978). This sequence of conflict (Wirt, 1981) shows how professionals commonly responded to different challenges:

- professional dominance characterized an earlier period that ignored individual complaints of service (e.g., "Why can't Johnny read?");
- growing awareness by many complainants of a common problem created an emerging public issue (e.g., school productivity concerns) which professionals would try to shunt off;
- consequently, group pressure in the total governing system generated a new turbulence policy (e.g., new legislation and litigation) which was misperceived by professionals as only "politics";
- finally, the outcome of the policy process produced new policies addressed to the ignored problem (e.g., special education programs);
- ultimately, change was accepted within the profession itself in its training and services--in short, the change became institutional (e.g., the curriculum for degrees in special education).

Role Shift: The Technician Becomes "Political"

Change always hurts those who have supported the status quo; philosopher Eric Hoffer once noted that "More painful than a broken bone is a changed habit." The most significant change was that the conflict sketched above necessarily compelled the superintendent to adopt a new role. Claiming the role of "managers of virtue" in charge of the "one best system" in an earlier era, now they no longer were accepted by clients of education who challenged both the virtue and efficiency of the system (Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Tyack, 1974). In the process, superintendents had to change their role because public expectations of their behavior had changed in this politicized environment. This role changed from the traditional "unpartisan technician" to a new "political professional." What specific behaviors and underlying attitudes did this involve (Wirt, 1988)?

The unpartisan technician role had once involved several expectations for superintendents. First, they were regarded as "apolitical" in two senses--not involved with political parties and not overtly active in the local decision-making process. This "myth" was

quite useful in separating professionals from the general public's belief that "politics" was dirty (Salisbury, 1967). Second, the superintendents were expected to possess "expertise," an applied common body of technical knowledge and skills drawn from the profession that could be employed across diverse jurisdictions. In the public view this aura of uncontroversial and technical expertise augmented their unpartisan stance. Third, it was expected that the superintendent's responsibility was to be both a leader in applying this technology and a manager in administering it. These were the leader-manager roles at which the profession worked assiduously over the years to instill in its members (e.g., see educational administration textbooks).

However, the political professional role that was taken on during the course of recent political turbulence developed because the old role had become unproductive in the public mind. Slowly (because it is still not fully accepted today) these professionals faced a policy context in which they came to a new realization; new behaviors and new values had to be

adopted if professional goals were to be achieved. Just as slowly, the realization came that conflict over educational policy is not only much like that over other policies, but it is also a normal, indeed, desirable, condition of a free society. Crowson has noted (1987, p. 61), "much of the literature on the politics of the superintendency over the years has focused on strategies for dealing with conflict" (see also Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985). The final realization--hard to come by and even harder to accept--was that the professional's power could legitimately be defined and directed by the political authority of the general public within which that power operated. This realization came more slowly for superintendents than it did for city managers (Zeigler et al., 1985).

One sign of the growing need to be "political" was that superintendents themselves began to differ over the basic values of education. Could one stand only for the value of quality while ignoring others? Or, could equity play just as important a role? But when was efficiency to be dominant? Should not choice by the clients also be valued? These conflicts were evident

among administrators in the battles over state education reform in the 1980s, as the values of quality versus choice were in contention (see essays in Boyd & Kerchner, 1988, and Hannaway & Crowson, 1989, part 2).

Role and Style in Conflict Management

Amid this new environment of running conflict and an emergent political role, what was the superintendent to do? How did one operate when necessarily living with conflict? Because the profession gave no singular answer, these administrators had to learn by doing. That new learning was shaped by the kinds of conflict they faced and by how strongly they felt about policy issues. In short, superintendents responded with a range of value intensity and personal styles in the task of conflict management in educational policy. This task became a central element of the new political professional role, and it became differentiated as a result of superintendents' intensity of values and styles. To give some pattern to the diverse nature of this new role, we will sketch a typology of these behaviors and styles of conflict management amid change

that faces the superintendents of today. Later we will relate the consequences to their role in instructional leadership.

Value Intensity in Conflict Management Behavior

As in all human conflict, how hard one fights depends on how much a value is threatened and by how great the opposition is. Like any one else, superintendents cannot fight with equal intensity over all threatened values; they will give different priorities to what is sacred, what is standard, and what is unimportant. Just as there is a range of value intensity for superintendents that affects their conflict management, there is also a range of conflict intensity in the communities that they face. These two ranges structure possible behaviors in superintendents' conflict management, as outlined in Table 1.

Thus, when the superintendent feels strongly about an educational matter, and the community conflict is also intense, a besieged role in conflict management is possible. One can either mobilize the public in support of one's direction--and win--or else go down fighting against community opposition--and lose. This behavior

may well typify those superintendents whose tenure has been shortened, who complain about politics in the job, and who fondly contemplate early retirement or another career.

Table 1

Conflict, Value Intensity, and Conflict Management Behaviors

Superintendent Intensity on Values	Community Conflict Intensity: High	Community Conflict Intensity: Low
High	Besieged	Unpartisan Technician
Low	Compliant Implementor	Overseer of Routines

Note. Modified from Wirt and Christovich, 1989, 28.

However, when community conflict is low in the face of the superintendent's intensely felt values, we are in the characteristic condition of the earlier unpartisan technician, that is, the apolitical expert who dominated the schooling scene for decades. Here, the superintendent could "lead" a community lacking any strong feeling other than a general wish for good education and for the "experts" to fill in the details.

But superintendents do not feel intensely about all educational matters. What behavior is required when the community is either intense or placid about those educational policy values on which the professional has low intensity? If community feeling is high, the superintendent's behavior can go along with what is sought and be the compliant implementor of those popular goals. Even if the community intensity is low, another behavior is possible, that of overseer of routines that constitutes any ongoing organization. Note that these matters also involve professional standards of quality, namely what and how to teach, routine accounting for use of resources, and so on. Note also that the superintendent's behavior involves standing aloof from

direct involvement in such routines, assigning responsibility to others, possibly setting the criteria for successful management, and then overseeing their operation.

This typological approach to the behaviors that superintendents can under take in conflict management implies several qualities that inhere in their educational administration today. Most of their time is likely spent with the last behavior, the overseer of routines; that is because its demands are great but responses to it are relatively certain. However, the greatest risk to the superintendent's position arises with high community involvement, for there the besieged behavior can easily lose. Consequently, it is one role that most superintendents likely wish to avoid whenever possible. But when conflict is undertaken with only the attitudes and skills of the unpartisan technician, the risk of losing becomes even greater; there is an extensive word-of-mouth lore among administrators about those who fought losing battles on the ground of "professional" standards. As for Table 1's <u>compliant implementor</u> behavior in conflict management, it is

another risk-avoidance strategy that denies the educational policy value at hand is very important. Finally, it is inherent in this conflict behavior matrix that sooner or later the superintendent will end up facing the clash between professionalism and community pressure on some matter; his or her lack of training in how to manage conflict can levy a heavy toll on energy, success, and tenure in office (Zeigler et al., 1985).

Styles in Conflict Management

How one chooses a conflict management behavior is shaped by style, namely, the individual reaction, given by one's character and personality. Enough is known about the distinctions of style among politicians (Fenno, 1978) to know that there is no single conflict behavior when one faces the furor and sweat of the public arena. Rather, what happens most often depends on personal qualities whose range creates an array of differing reactions to politics.

These reactions are not infinite, but instead they fall into a relatively few styles that are rooted in the human tendency either to fight or to flee when faced by conflict. As the fight-flee distinction was developed

in the classic typology first advanced by Hirschman (1970), one can seek to: a) exercise a positive "voice" in conflict; b) withdraw from it in an "exit" reaction; or c) stay but ignore conflict in an "apathy" mode. We would modify these distinctions. Applied to superintendents faced with school conflict, three behavior possibilities exist: actively pursue one's goals in the policy turbulence (fight), not get involved in it (avoid), or seek to resolve it through compromise, collaboration, or accommodation (mediate).

The reaction to conflict that the superintendent selects from this range is not dictated by professional norms but rests either upon one's character or personality or upon the intensity of the political conflict one faces. As noted above, that intensity can range from high to low. These two ranges--style and intensity--suggest a battery of responses to conflict, and Table 2 sets them out as analytical constructs.

Table 2

Superintendent Styles and Community Conflict

Superintendent Style	Community Conflict	
	High	Low
Avoid	Presider	Delegator
Mediate	Compromiser	Facilitator
Flight	Assertive	Professional

Note. Modified from Wirt & Christovich, 1989, 28.

High community conflict. Under this condition, the superintendent who prefers to avoid conflict will act only as a presider, and not try to direct it. This could mean dodging questions about one's stands, setting up study groups that put off decisions, focusing on being the guardian of the rules of procedure, or otherwise shifting the decision to another place (the school board or the state) or to another time. Another style amid high community conflict that arises with a

mediate role is the compromiser, that is, managing conflict actively by bringing contestants together on some middle ground; here the approach is collaborative, undogmatic, and patient. This style comes close to the modal type for elected politicians in the decision-making process.

Finally when there is great community conflict, those whose behavior requires fighting for preferred positions can adopt the assertive style. Typical is the superintendent whose professional norms have been challenged, as set out above. This style actively seeks support of groups within and outside the school district and builds coalitions among them--to defend against, or to seek, change in educational programs. Clearly, then, the presence of intense community conflict does not mean that a single style of conflict management is required; the personal element intervenes in the behavior adopted.

Low community conflict. How does style alter when the community is placid or uninterested in school decision making? As Table 2 indicates, the avoid-mediate-fight behaviors generate another set of three styles. Thus, those who prefer to avoid conflict

will become the delegator. That is, other professionals within the system will be given the authority to make educational decisions and administer them, maybe even without supervision from the superintendent. When there is low community conflict, the mediator type would become the facilitator, assisting other professionals while setting the general goals of the system. Here, much stress would be placed upon the kind of collaborative efforts that mark some effective principals (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Finally, the superintendent oriented to fight would be much like the style of educational leadership that built the "one best system" in the first place--the professional. This would involve actively pursuing within the school system professional programs in curriculum, staff development, and so on.

These roles and styles are logical constructs although we suspect that no one is used exclusively by any superintendent. Yet this approach does help us focus upon the limited range of behavior and style of superintendents amid conflict. Choice of each may vary

with experience, community context, and "career-bound" versus "place-bound" job preferences (Carlson, 1972).

Field Studies of Superintendents Amid Contract Conflict

We can give some empirical life to these analytic concepts by studying superintendents facing actual conflict.[2] Detailing four behaviors and six styles of conflict management in separate case studies was limited by length requirements of this paper. But it seemed valuable to trace the empirical styles of a subset in order to demonstrate how such research could be undertaken. We selected two styles from Table 2 for exploration in this paper; two cases of one style permits us to show variations in the successful exercise of that style. Necessarily, we cannot set out all the details of conflict in the space available; enough is provided, however, to permit us to focus squarely upon these superintendents' conflict management.

We sought three districts in conflict that had common criteria. All three had to have an extended period of conflict over a school matter. All had to be from the same state--in this case, Illinois--because varying state law can affect superintendent authority;

for example, the position lacks a legal definition in many states (cited in Crowson, 1987). All had to be the same type of town in the same subregion of the state because differences in size affect the degree of conflict (Zeigler & Jennings, 1974; but see Wirt & Christovich, 1989). All had to involve the same conflict issue. In this case, we chose teacher contract negotiation because the nature of conflict management may vary with the issue. And all had to occur in the same time period--late 1980s--because the shifting currents of political turbulence may change superintendents' selection of behavior and style. Within these bounds, then, how did superintendents attempt to manage conflict in their districts?

Homer: Fight-Assertive

The community. The smallest of three small towns sitting on the immensity of the prairies of East Central Illinois, Homer, is a farm community in every aspect. No ethnic or religious diversity is evident in community decisions, and its homogeneity underlies standard rural institutions. It is the kind of place that has a coffee shop where everyone of importance meets for social and

business matters every morning while retirees look on. It is like any of thousands of small towns across America with everyone and every group "connected" to all others (Peshkin, 1978). They are solid people, rooted in an agricultural society but also worried about an often frightening outside world. Like many small towns, there is a very real conflict potential within its borders.

Mostly farm people, the town has had little change in its population. It is a poor place, as such matters are judged by government agencies; for example, it has a high percentage of free and reduced-rate lunches for school children. As for the economy, farming has fallen off; in the 1980s, these farmers were hit by a national decline in farm value and a rise in tax burdens. Consequently, assessed land values fell sharply and painfully although not as much as in other towns its size.

Overall, though, the people of Homer found their once comfortable world was breaking up around them. The American qualities they saw themselves embodying so

deeply were shaken by a farm crisis. That trauma had to affect their attitudes about their schools.

The schools. The common qualities of such communities have been, until quite recently, reflected in their schools. The school board had been mostly local leaders from farming and business. But the turbulence throughout the national scene, discussed earlier, also broke out in this small place. Numerous actions and events in Homer had precipitated pervasive conflict in the schools, and their superintendents felt the brunt of it. Thus, it had known nine superintendents in the thirteen years before 1989. It was no place for a professional administrator to build a career or to linger until retirement. Opinions about these superintendents varied sharply and strongly, so their quick exits came as no surprise.

At the core of all this school conflict were two factors--tax burdens and unionism. The farm crisis meant that taxes hurt even more, and so any increase in public spending, say for higher teacher salaries, was unthinkable. As a farm community, Homer had always been anti-union, so the coming of teacher organizations (the

Homer Association of Teachers, HAT) generated the usual conflict. The HAT came on the scene about 1986 and by 1989 had already negotiated one contract. But some townspeople felt that some of HAT's members were not connected to the place (several teachers lived elsewhere), and anyhow collective bargaining seemed an alien concept. The HAT's president in the strike year lived in the university town of Champaign (always suspicious), and so, not surprisingly, she was judged to be an "outsider." In such places, it takes two generations of local residence to be regarded as someone connected to the community. Also, an outside agency became involved in the strike, the state government, usually seen as a hostile intruder in local matters. State laws affected schooling, especially for collective bargaining, mandates (often without state funding), and the length of the school year.

Amid this typical small town environment, with its shared sense of place, there erupted in the late 1980s the longest school strike in U.S. history, running an entire school year and beyond.

The Superintendent's Role and Style. We will not detail here the moves and countermoves, the publicity, and the public claims that attended this collective bargaining incident. The local daily newspaper provide them for those interested, and we used them to good effect.[3] This information provided the background for our interviews with the actors in this account, interviews designed to illuminate superintendent behavior amid strike negotiations. Many other matters were involved in this strike, so our tight focus on the superintendent should not deny the actions and motives of others.

By all accounts Superintendent Harry Starkey was an active participant in the strike, undertaking a style that was fight-assertive. He might not have seemed this way to the public, however. He avoided being a source of comments on most matters that arose in this strike; even when he did comment, he would only refer inquiries to the board or its president. But our interviews reveal that he made this decision that board officials would handle all public comments. Also, the board president could be reached regularly at the school

office during the day, supervising school matters other than the negotiations.

Starkey's assertive style was shaped in part by the board's expectations. The board had earlier expected a strike when hiring him; he was actually brought back from retirement to fight teachers in the expected tough negotiations. He had gained a reputation as being "dictatorial"; he saw himself as an agent of the board in negotiations, picked to do their bidding only. His professional views did not allow for input from teachers, who were regarded as only "employees." Starkey's views fitted well with those of the board and many in this traditional community.

His assertive style came out in small ways that teachers found unpleasant, if not insulting, but which his supporters thought fair in an "us versus them" perception of the conflict. For example, he directed the school cooks to cut off the teacher's coffee that was usually supplied from a school urn. He also told teachers that they could not have supplies, such as workbooks, thereby causing them to purchase and duplicate them from their own pockets. He even told

teachers they couldn't come behind the school's office counter or use a new duplicating machine (but could use another and older one located elsewhere). These actions accounted for the bitterness of the atmosphere for teachers; said one teacher, "Anything he thought the teachers might enjoy he took away." For his supporters, however, these moves were proper when the teacher union was seen as an enemy, and one with outsiders in it at that.

We can see that Superintendent Starkey assertively carried out his board's wishes in a fight style that reflected a beseiged behavior (see Table 1). For example, after his hiring late in the summer, teachers received letters of reassignment to different grades and activities on a Friday afternoon before they were to start to work on the next Monday; no reasons were given for the transfers. Not surprisingly, the HAT filed a grievance, an arbitrator was assigned the matter, but no hearing was held. Yet the new superintendent had signaled clearly his intent to control teachers' responsibilities.

In the weeks of strike that followed, insiders reported that there was no conflict between Starkey and the board on handling these matters. Indeed, the accord of the two seemed to harden the nature of the conflict. As a result, the clash went on for months amid a splurge of charges and denials. Parents entered the fray to seek reconciliation, but the law prohibited them from bringing court action to resolve the conflict. That was particularly frustrating as they saw their children wasting a year of courses and credits, varsity sports, and the seniors' golden year causing a deferred college entrance for many.

The denouement. The conflict dragged on despite efforts by officials at higher levels, and this development illustrates the web of intergovernmental relations that now embeds much local government activity. The regional superintendent (responsible for certain school matters in this and adjoining counties) made tentative moves toward reconciliation but to no avail. Then, the governor sought to reconcile the issue by mediation, meaning he would send a staff member; however, the Homer board wanted him to intervene in

person, an unacceptable request that removed him from the conflict. The local board was more open to federal mediation--which also led nowhere. So mediation was returned to actors at the state level. For example, the state board of education insisted that it would enforce the state collective bargaining law. Also, complaints from the HAT about negotiations were given to the state education labor relations board; most charges were finally settled but one remained pending as late as early 1990.

Finally, almost a year after it began, a two-year contract was signed; the reasons why and the issue of who "won" or "lost" are not relevant here. Discussions during the strike by the Homer board with other districts about consolidating ended in a subsequent school consolidation. Two of the four Homer board members were not elected to the new district board. Superintendent Starkey went back to retirement. But board officials won't discuss this strike even now because at least one matter is still under litigation.

Evaluation. In this case we see in full flowering the fight role and assertive style of Tables 1 and 2.

The older professional view of the primacy of board and superintendent over teachers, a matter of strong conviction that encrusted school decision-making for over a century, was challenged by the arrival of collective bargaining. The Homer board, having lost a first contract dispute, sought next an assertive superintendent to carry the fight against the teachers. His assertive style of controlling teachers ranged from the serious (salary disputes) to the picayune (that coffee pot). This environment stands in sharp contrast with the limited conflict in the first negotiation under an earlier superintendent.

Of course, an assertive style does not dictate the kinds of superintendent action seen in this place. There is a fuller repertoire of behavior by those who undertake the fight-assertive approach to conflict than the case of Homer. But this does provide a focused study of how it can be carried out in a simple context. Such a case teaches us to look for underlying patterns in conflict management by the new political professional.

Blue Ridge: Mediate-Compromiser

The Blue Ridge school district of Farmer City, not too far from Homer, is a recently consolidated district of about 2,200 students. It shares many aspects of the Homer teacher strike, but the superintendent, Donald Albracht, failed the board because he sought a mediator style, whose use antagonized both board and teachers. Not all mediators are successful or are liked by those whose conflict they seek to resolve; the way of the peace-maker is hard.

The community. This district is somewhat larger than Homer although comparisons are confused by consolidation changes in both places during this period of the mid-1980s. But quite similar was the dominance of farming in the larger community in which it was located, Farmer City. Also similar was the influence of farmers on school policy, and their concern over taxes and expenditures in a constraining economy. A weekly newspaper editor judged that Blue Ridge did have a closer sense of identification with the nearby University of Illinois than did Homer. Still, it was not a union town by any measure; it was the first strike

of any kind the town had ever experienced. It was to be sometimes treated like an extreme case of bad manners by employees obligated to serve children. But resolution of this strike was far less protracted and mean-minded than that of Homer. Even better for this community, the strike ran only fourteen days.

Course of the strike. Again, we think it unnecessary to detail the claims and counter-claims of this strike but only to sketch the nature of the conflict. In August 1988, the Blue Ridge Federation of Teachers (BRFT) filed a strike notice after the usual failure of board negotiations. Also usual were the central issues: salary and contract language; neither side could agree on whether the salary increase was proper. The board refused arbitration, sought to carry on the school's extracurricular activities, and said they would hire substitutes to keep schools operating. But when they threatened to dock teachers for strike days, the BRFT filed an unfair labor practice suit, and teachers from nearby Champaign joined in a public demonstration, as did local parents and teachers. The

weekly newspaper editorialized that both sides must get together soon.

But the board persisted in the effort to continue schooling, directing Albracht to compile a list of substitutes and to continue school activities with those who did cross the picket line. The BRFT asked teachers and students not to attend classes, as they believed board actions would only prolong the strike. The BRFT was more effective in its appeals; football practice was cancelled because too few players and coaches showed up. Sports are a serious matter in small towns where varsity athletics form one of the major forces connecting the community members to one another. The board responded by a newspaper ad that posted all teacher salaries by name, as well as the increase they would receive with the board offer. When the federal mediator called a meeting, the BRFT expressed willingness to negotiate, but suddenly a tentative agreement was signed which both sides later ratified.

The superintendent's behavior and style. During the strike in Blue Ridge, Albracht acted visibly as the agent of the board. Thus, he sought to recruit

substitute teachers. He announced that the state truancy laws would be enforced. He answered questions about school security, hired guards, and recruited parents to ride the buses to school. He announced that substitutes had been hired and that all grading opportunities missed by absent students would be turned in to the unit office.

Albracht believed that he had been hired because he had experience with a teacher strike in another position, and that the Blue Ridge board was expecting a strike that he could handle more effectively than they. This context he shared with Sharkey in Homer. However, during the strike, Albracht thought he could avoid participation in it, despite the actions noted above. But unlike Sharkey, he had to explain to the media and public how these special arrangements for school and extracurricular activities would work during the strike. That action clearly made him visible to negotiators and the public, thereby making it look to the teachers like it was "his" strike. This perception made it difficult for him to work well with them after the strike.

Local observers outside the school system saw him as a nice person who always tried to see both sides of a conflict. However, each side did indeed see him as being on both sides, and so both sides became angered. Some even claimed that he may have instigated the newspaper ad revealing teacher salaries. Albracht himself saw the conflict as a matter of fluctuations in tides of public opinion within the community and also as a set of issues that he could not fully control.

It is clear that Albracht lacked the assertive style that the board may have sought in hiring him. He shared some of that style with the Homer superintendent. But he emerges as one style in the mediate behavior, namely, the compromiser seen in Table 2. He was not fully engaged by only one side and not willing to be as assertive as the board and style require. He seemed more like a superintendent carrying out dutifully his responsibilities to the board but concerned also with the teacher needs and the educational environment that would follow the end of the strike. So he seemed to wish more to be the compromiser even though the board had imposed an assertive style on him. However, those

who walk in the middle of the road can be hit by cars on both sides. Thus, in mid-January 1989, just weeks after the strike, the board voted unanimously to accept his resignation. A more effective exercise of the mediate-compromiser style should be offered to demonstrate variations exist even within a style. A site about 75 miles south will do that.

Mattoon: Mediate-Compromiser

The community. Located in East Central Illinois' prairies, Mattoon is a larger town than the other two, a county seat, with larger components of older citizens (13% vs. 7% in the state). A blue-collar and farmer town, its industrial history is filled with comings and goings of plants, and opinion is now divided on whether the local economy is better off than a decade ago. Nevertheless, as the economic constraints of the farm and industrial sector tightened through the 1980s, people in both sectors felt sensitive about public costs. Significantly, a successful and brief strike in 1984 had changed the social composition of the Mattoon school board. Whereas before it had known but a single farmer and mostly business and professional people, the

Farm Bureau, after 1984 had organized to elect more farm representation; in the next board election, three farmers were elected.

Course of the strike. In the summer of 1984, the board hired a new superintendent, Walter Warfield, and two months later the first strike of eleven days took place until a two-year contract was signed. From all accounts, the board had taken on Warfield, anticipating this strike. But there was some disgruntlement in the district that the teachers had got too much out of this first contract and that preparations should be made for the next negotiation.

In August 1986, then, teachers in the Mattoon Education Association (MEA) sought mediation before expiration of the 1984 contract, but to no avail. So in September the "intent to strike" letter was sent, the board offered binding arbitration, the MEA declined, and the strike was on. It would last a little over a month; besides salary, the issues were class size, faculty reduction, and teacher evaluation. Superintendent Warfield was especially interested in the last, as he

wanted to write the prototype evaluation that Illinois might adopt, for he was a man with state connections.

The familiar charges and rebuttals took place, but at the end the strike was settled after 33 hours of a mediation session with a representative of the Illinois Board of Education. The result was a three-year contract, with some accommodation on both sides. Board members would later grumble about this process, as they thought that some loose ends were left unresolved. Thus the board ended up paying teachers for strike days plus the make-up days. Grumbled one participant, "Worst mistake we ever made. His [the mediator's] sole purpose was to get a settlement. We shouldn't have let him leave till we got it all on paper."

Superintendent Role and Style. Superintendent Warfield had a high profile in the 1984 strike--only two months after he arrived--and some were offended by his leading role, as many townspeople were actually in sympathy with the teachers. In the 1986 strike, however, he was available to those who had questions, but he did not directly lead negotiations. He was consulted by board negotiators, but he was not on the

negotiating team, and he commented as little as possible. Observers believed this changed style arose because he had learned from the first strike.

He may have been responsible for the turning point in negotiations by holding a public meeting to answer questions--the only sign of his visibility in this period. A week before the marathon negotiation, the board had met privately with a large crowd outside awaiting for news and making it difficult for the board to leave. When members left, Warfield invited the crowd in to answer any questions about the negotiations. Observers on both sides said his comments were full and frank during the next two hours, and they also believed it had turned community opinion toward the board. Less than a week later, the board went to the state for mediation (state officials were also pressuring the two sides to settle).

A factor in understanding this superintendent's behavior is that, unlike the two others, Warfield was earnestly upwardly mobile in the profession; he was active in the state's superintendent organization. After the 1986 strike, he received not a three-year but

a two-year contract (often seen as a signal of the board's less-than-overwhelming satisfaction, something that also occurred in Blue Ridge). So, he resigned in April 1988 and moved on to a somewhat larger town, Decatur, in the same prairie area.

Warfield typifies the compromiser style within the mediator behavior, seen in Table 1-2. Earlier, we suggested one such behavior in this mode was seeking to be collaborative in order to bring contestants around. While he could not be officially a mediator, given his legal responsibilities to the board, he could express the board's views in a manner that was not simply assertive, but rather provided some understanding of teachers' needs. It is instructive that his efforts in the dramatic meeting with the townspeople was thought to have moved support toward the board and, ostensibly, toward his own professional views. But unlike the Homer superintendent, he permitted some role for teachers' views, and unlike Blue Ridge, he did not seek to represent both sides. The case also illustrates the subtlety of this compromiser role, a role that also

typifies decision-makers in the elective world of local government.

Why Superintendents Do Little Instructional Leadership

Let us draw back from the close details of these conflicts and ask a larger question. Does the time spent on this and other kinds of conflict, added to the time on managing, leave the superintendent any time for instructional leadership? Let's review some evidence.

The Conflict-Management Task

When one scholar recently asked New York superintendents this general question, note their answer:

> "If I have any understanding of what it is you do, underneath it all is the need to continually deal with and manage conflicts of one type or another. Is that it?" The unanimous response I received was, in essence, "You got it! That's where it's at!" (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985, p. xi).

Similarly, among hundreds of superintendents interviewed in a national sample of AASA members in the early 1980s,

large numbers reported increased citizen and group pressure (Wirt & Christovich, 1989). Further, in a national sample of 88 districts in the same years, handling conflict was found to be their central problem, for which they were poorly trained, certainly more poorly than city managers (Zeigler et al., 1985).

Interviewees for the present project in 1989 among Illinois state education officials and lobbyists reported their impressions of what was happening to superintendents in their state:

- Many local boards don't conceive of their superintendents as an in educational leader but more as a manager.
- Many superintendents today are comfortable with not taking the lead.
- They did exercise leadership, but that depended upon the community; some places have high expectations of it, but others don't.
- Superintendents in smaller districts look more to state help in curriculum leadership than do those in bigger districts because the former are uncertain how to do it and lack staff help.

- They are retiring earlier now--more than are teachers or those in other professions.
- They are keenly aware of the degree to which they are now being regulated more by state mandates.
- Some of the conflict the superintendent faces is not of his making. For example, the superintendent can't raise taxes needed for better schooling, but the citizens can--and often don't.
- What's changed most about this position today is the frequency of conflict; the problem is the need to practice styles of conflict management that are quite new for them.
- The local community often expects the district to do something it can't actually do; for example, discipline is often complained about, but the kind of discipline the community wants can't be levied under state law.
- The superintendents today have more to do but no more power to do it. For example, in Illinois they must run criminal background checks on their school personnel and oversee the evaluation of

teachers and programs. All districts are expected to do this paperwork now, where before only some might.

- Superintendents must spend more time today in the care and feeding of their boards. They need not be great on curriculum but they absolutely must deal well with their board--even when they don't have training in it.

There are several themes here reported at the state level that are echoed in other research. The job is more demanding of superintendents today, and, in a way, that is different from an earlier period. Consequently, there is little time left then for other than dealing with conflict and routines--especially when some of their problems are imposed upon them by the district or the state.

Superintendents, however, don't manage these new and more demanding tasks very well. The data on increased early retirement, decreased job tenure, serious health problems (noted earlier), or the impact on their marriages (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985, chap. 11) tell us that the demands exceed the capacities of many

professionals. Of course, this does not apply to those who manage it well, who stay on, and who find the work keenly exciting. But as a whole, this profession is not a happy group, although some individuals are.

The Politics of Decision-Making versus Education

This is not all of the story, of course, for there are some positive qualities to the American superintendency. There is regular but anecdotal evidence that its members are:

- motivating others to achieve a particular goal;
- working with principals to manage a total system effectively and efficiently;
- using the external mandates so as to advance a personal professional interest;
- clarifying the public's confusion about many aspects of schooling. After all, the large majority of superintendents do not leave the profession while many others earnestly seek to enter it.

So while the job becomes more demanding of time and energy with a new focus upon board relations and decision making, the superintendent is still an

important part of local school systems. Being an educator, as well as a politician, combines an old and new task for the position. However, this combination is not finely balanced in each position or district. Rather, these professionals are reporting more demands on the political side, but much less on the educational side. All the data provided in this paper make that point.

This shift between the two tasks means that the superintendent gets farther removed from exercising leadership in instruction. The authority to do so remains, but the enabling power is less exercised. He or she may be the conduit for new curriculum or may be testing mandates from outside governments, but being a conduit is not the same thing as leading. He or she may cut budgets for teachers' needs or reduce curriculum programs because of constricting resources. But these activities are not effective ways of being creative about instruction. He or she may spend more and more time in building good personal relations with board members, but that leaves less time for innovation or supervision of instruction. All these uses of power are

political, and all are more a matter of survival than of leadership.

Organizational maintenance and survival are now the twin tasks of these professionals. Even their principals reflect much of these conditions. Boyd and Hartman (1988, p. 279) found that principals spend 80% of their time at maintenance tasks, including student control. They know also the increased time they now must spend responding to community pressures. And certainly, they understand the relationship between these two tasks of maintenance and survival. If so, then, more time being spent on control must mean less time on instructional leadership. Above principals in the hierarchy, the superintendent finds the task of survival even harder because the scope of demands upon the office are much greater. Also there are more frequent penalties for failure, for poor board relations, or for whatever agitates the community at any given time. All these conditions affect tenure. Of course, superintendent control can be directed toward instructional leadership, even though, as Crowson (1987, p. 58) notes, this is little studied. What <u>does</u> emerge

from the available research is a picture of little coordination and control by central office management and even these activities, Crowson judges, "seem to be only marginally related to the production activities of the schools" (for evidence see Hannaway & Sproul, 1978, p. 4). But Crowson reports something of vital importance in these few available studies. The most effective superintendents exercised "direct, tightly structured control over curriculum and instruction." However, he cautions, "most superintendents have little direct influence on their schools, especially in the domains of curriculum and instruction" (p. 60; also see his sources). Indeed, a recent massive study, employing quantitative analysis to weigh the effects of possible explanations of achievement outcomes, came to similar conclusions. That is, "attendance at an effectively organized school [measured by numerous variables] is worth at least a full year of additional achievement over attendance at an ineffectively organized school all things being equal" (Chubb, 1987, cited in Wirt & Kirst, 1989, p. 189).

Hidden in this leadership interaction may be a gender issue. Studies of some women superintendents have found that, despite differing focuses, they were alike in being "very committed to what goes on in classrooms and to relationships with teachers and other staff within the district" (p. 16; see other sources cited here). Unlike many male superintendents who are distant from, maybe even indifferent to, curriculum and instruction, women may reflect an alternative view, a "voice of resistance" to the dehumanizing aspects of school bureaucracy. This aspect has been a little-studied aspect of instructional leadership by superintendents.

How did superintendents come to this condition of having limited leadership in instruction? Possibly it arises from the career track (Crowson, 1987, p. 57), for their preparation is haphazard. Experiential training is what most have (70% lack a doctoral degree); such training means learning from the mistakes of others--mistakes which also teach just how important survival is. The training of experience teaches the novice that little time is spent on instructional

leadership by those to whose position they aspire. Also, those with doctorates will find very little in that training that pays much attention to instructional leadership; much of it is dedicated to improving conceptualization and strategies in a world of administrative survival. In recent times, even teaching superintendents about the political nature of their job is but another form of learning the strategies of survival, not of instructional leadership. Is this result attributable to job expectations in the community?

Factors Working against Superintendent Productivity

Why don't superintendents do more to improve educational productivity? Are there systemic forces which work against them doing much? Several reasons can be cited. Not all districts want superintendents to cope with strikes, despite our Illinois site studies. But many want them to deal with one or more of the forces of turbulence set out early in this paper. Chief among these forces in the 1980s has been coping with economic constraints, consolidation, state-federal mandates, or the individual interests of the board members. Note

that none of these most common community demands have much to do with improving the instructional program; there just may be no demand for instructional leadership from this office. Of course, that is not true for the districts with greatest resources and best academic programs; community expectations for this official to provide instructional leadership are very high in such places. Elsewhere, though, with such consensus absent, communities seem not to seek leadership from the superintendent.

Nor do superintendents provide it very often. One report found that superintendents on the average spent less than 1% of their time on instruction because they had formed "mutual non-interference pacts" with school principals (Boyd & Hartman, 1988, p. 281). The same scholars (pp. 286-293) provide a clear explanation of why superintendents do so little to enhance educational productivity. Maintaining their inertia is, in economic terms, more beneficial than overcoming it, despite its costs. Also, their organizational framework is "loosely coupled," in Weick's (1976) famous formulation. Its structure is unconnected to the organization's work

activity, and the latter is unconnected to effects of that work. So the superintendent ends up unconnected to curriculum and instruction while presuming that lower levels are doing those jobs well but without inspecting that assumption. A "logic of confidence" thus holds the levels together, a logic that is lubricated by myths, ceremonies, and negotiations among members who exchange benefits.[4] Finally, political factors militate against superintendents' instructional leadership that could improve the system's productivity. Success in the office consists not of being an instructional leader, but of developing interpersonal skills for working out exchanges among all levels in order to maximize non-monetary benefits (Crowson & Boyd, 1988). Meanwhile, the superintendent has personal political costs in maintaining good relationships with the board.

In such a milieu of non-leadership in instruction, that task is devolved to the school site. But not all principals will undertake that role because it is not in their interest to oversee teachers' instruction; there is no system or personal reward for it (Shapiro & Crowson, in press). Rather, as we have noted, those

tasks are shunted aside for those of maintenance and control. Of course, this does not apply to the principals found in the effective school literature, as we will note shortly. A key insight of that literature is that among other conditions, such effects are enhanced when there exists a principal willing to undertake instructional leadership. The result of this repeated devolution is that responsibility for instruction rests with the teachers. Even if evaluation of their work is undertaken, it is risky for central and site administrators to do it or to do much with it.

The result is that in many school systems, the loose coupling, devolution, and minimizing of risk-taking end up with no systemic leadership role for any but the isolated teacher. Exceptions abound, of course, but even these give little evidence of the importance of the superintendent as instructional leader. Where he or she <u>does</u> lead, as we will see, it is because the usual conditions sketched above are reversed.

The Superintendent: Lightening Rod or Scapegoat

Our review of this instructional role leaves a clear picture that leadership here is not often undertaken, that numerous reasons exist for its absence, and that coping with other tasks--particularly the political ones--leave little time for it. Rather, system maintenance, as well as personal survival, are attributes of the new political role. With it, however, comes the increasing costs of popular criticism that make the superintendent a lighting rod for turbulent school politics. But that is not a satisfactory metaphor. After all, a lightning rod is neutral to the forces sweeping through it; this official is not. The rod does not interact with the transmission of the lightning; the superintendent does. The rod can't shape the flow of external forces; but this person can--under circumstances about which we know too little. The lightning rod is not what Mark Shedd had in mind when he once wrote, "In the last analysis, with most decisions you make, you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. These days it's a no-win game, so you might as well make up your mind to do what you think is right and

let the chips fall where they may" (cited in Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985, p. 7). And finally, most lightning rods don't burn out from the charges they experience.

A better metaphor arises if we look at the job another way. The superintendent is caught up in the clash between the participatory impulse manifest in all democracies, on one side, and the bureaucratic professional suppliers of service to those citizens on the other. This paper is no lament for this school official when we note the hard times that he or she is experiencing from popular pressures. Why should superintendents escape such pressures when no other service, elected or appointed, does? Why should they escape pressure when boards, principals, and teachers also are experiencing it in this large-scale revolt of the client noted earlier? As superintendents find all the time, they lack any natural constituency in the community which they can mobilize in their political struggle. So they are expendable because they provide a convenient scapegoat for all the complaints that the public has about schooling today. Many complaints get funnelled directly to them through the growing

involvement of school board members in the daily administration of the schools, a common complaint of many superintendents. But this pressure is simply a reflection of the growing participation of citizens in their decision-making about services.

Ironically, many of the problems that superintendents face are not really resolvable by them. Teacher contracts, inequity of resources and expenditures, lack of family support of education, opposition of taxpayers, the imposition of external mandates--all are only marginally manipulable by this professional. But each problem is a source of grievance by some public in the community, and each seeks to get the system to deal with it. If it can't, then blame is sought, and the most visible--not the same as most blameworthy--is the superintendent. The public may sense that changing the office holders may actually do little to change things--rather like changing coaches on chronically losing sports teams. But the exercise of public power in a democracy requires some accountability for its use. Frequent changes of boards through elections, and of superintendents through appointments,

satisfy that popular sense of making someone responsible for what goes on. Principals are too local, and teachers are too diffuse as a group, to remove and replace, and the state is too far away to influence. But the superintendent is visible across the community, a clear and singular target for displacing community frustration over a host of schooling matters. In some primitive cultures, wooden statues of their gods are showered with gifts when the harvest is good but beaten with sticks when it is poor.

Professional schools and associations do not teach the lesson that is inferred here, namely, superintendents are hired to be fired, because they must be responsible to the vox dei of democracy. But that lesson is inferable from the data reviewed in this paper. What we do not know enough about, because it is so little studied aside from anecdotes, is what superintendents can do about instructional leadership. How can they lead curriculum and instruction? How can they make a difference in student achievement? And--in the process--how can they satisfy the public's desire for accountability? The moral may be this: Until the

profession learns how to answer the first two questions, thereby gaining the support for the last, job tenure and satisfaction will continue to be slight for this chief executive officer. Meanwhile, we need another round of effective school research, this time focused on effective superintendents.

Implications for Effective Leadership and Future Research

Strong clues about such leadership is now emerging in important research on effective superintendents. We wish merely to sketch these ideas as we close this study; they show that amid the conflict of this professional's life there are great possibilities to affect student outcomes. Just two of these new research efforts will suggest what is possible, and both show leadership arises when "loose coupling" is overcome.

Peterson (1984) draws from the literature of control in other kinds of organizations to study principals' behavior, but the work also has implications for superintendency research. He explored six control mechanisms which operate for other managers of

organizations and which appeared in a large sample of districts. These mechanisms included:

1. Direct supervision by observation;
2. Resource allocation to subunits;
3. Structuring behavior through plans, procedures, and standardization ("input control");
4. Monitoring and evaluating performance and results ("output control");
5. Imposing and internalizing norms and values (selection-socialization");
6. Using the environments to shape expectations and behavior.

While this work did not relate behavior to outcomes, a subsequent study explored effective superintendents' control of the "technical core" (services affecting outcomes) (Peterson, Murphy, & Hallinger, 1987). While this work is cautious and rests only upon superintendents' perceptions, it also accords with prior knowledge of effective principals. The authors conclude that for superintendents a "combination of coordinative, controlling, and assessing behaviors and structures affected both technical efficiency and

cultural linkages to increase student achievement in the district" (p. 90).

What were the conditions they found? In school sites identified by prior research as effective, superintendents explained how they controlled and coordinated principals and teachers. These methods were:

> Instructional, that is requiring one instructional method for all teachers and ensuring its use; developing staff; evaluating teachers, including use of their students' achievement scores; and helping dismiss teachers.
>
> Curriculum, that is, shaping and coordinating what went on in classes; controlling content; and ensuring its implementation.
>
> Other, that is, shaping expectations for school through goal-setting; supervising and evaluating principals' influence on the technical core; and selecting principals who had such influence.

Let's make explicit what is being suggested in both studies--leaders can truly act like leaders in improving student achievement. These findings describe

administrators actually undertaking similar tasks: defining goals for others, implementing them with resources and personnel, overseeing their operations, and evaluating the results. Those tasks are common to all leadership whether in the military, government, church, or schools. However, the research noted early in this paper shows something else--superintendents don't actually do much of this kind of leading because they are caught up in other tasks. We have cited conflict management as one that embroils most of them. Another, not addressed in this paper, is being consumed by administrivia, a problem that has long plagued small-town systems (see Tyack & Hansot, 1982, chap. 12). And these are tasks that the community culture expects in such persons, as we noted in our Illinois site studies.

Caught between the ocean of trivial management and the storms of conflict, the American superintendent lacks the time, if not the inclination, to provide instructional leadership. But as we have seen, there is a developing understanding of the ways to provide it. Until schools of education focus more upon teaching

skills of instructional leadership rather than management, and until professionals undertake to employ these skills, our communities will get little local leadership. An outline of such a training program has been set out elsewhere (Wirt, 1988).

But then, maybe that is what communities prefer. If so, then both they and superintendents will receive ever greater curriculum control by state governments. The history of other local policy services shows how the drive for improving them escalates to higher levels of government because of little local support for better services, and certainly education has been no different. However, the evidence that instructional leadership can take place does offer hope that the escalator can be slowed, but not if the superintendent is expected to fight his way through the day.

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Footnotes

[1]. Philip Zodhiates, University of Illinois, reminded me of this definition.

[2]. Interviews for the field work were carried out by Elizabeth Wirt in early 1989 under an OERI grant from the National Center for Leadership Studies. Interviews of the state officials were conducted by the author.

[3]. We appreciate the access to clippings files provided by editors of the Champaign News-Gazette.

[4]. Scholars note, however, recent research that challenges just how loosely coupled the system is (see Crowson and Morris, 1985; Hannaway and Sproull, 1978-1979).

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Lonnie Wagstaff
Professor, Educational Administration, University of Texas at Austin

Project Investigators

University of Illinois at Urbana

Carole Ames, Chair, Educational Psychology
Russell Ames, Director, University High Laboratory School
Ellen Russell, Associate Chair, Educational Psychology
Alan Peshkin, Professor, Educational Psychology
Frederick Wirt, Professor, Political Science

University of Illinois at Chicago

Larry Braskamp, Dean, College of Education

The University of Michigan

C. Philip Kearney, Professor, Education
Martin Maehr, Director, Education and Psychology
Carol Midgley, Project Associate
Karl Weick, Rensis Likert Collegiate Professor, School of Business

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Visiting Scholars

William Boyd, Professor, Education, Penn State University
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